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Here is my take on the current process, as printed in Western Outdoor News:

Tail wags the dog when it comes
to development of Central Coast MPAs

Everyone involved in the Central Coast Regional Stakeholders Working Group had the right to be proud of their accomplishments when the group met for the last time Dec. 6 and 7 in Monterey. After meeting for two days a month for six months, with innumerable side meetings, dinners, etc., the working group selected three packages of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) to send to the Blue Ribbon Task Force (BRTF) via the Science Advisory Team (SAT).

The Blue Ribbon Task Force got exactly what they wanted, and that's the problem.

Going into the final round of deliberations, members of the stakeholders group were admonished by the Task Force to pay strict attention to the guidance of the SAT. Stanford professor and environmental lawyer Meg Caldwell of the BRTF was there to monitor the proceedings.

Scott McCreary of COMCUR, who facilitated the meetings, reminded the stakeholders that fully developed MPA packages were their last chance to significantly influence the process.

Can it be right that the scientists, and not the stakeholders, get the last shot at the packages before they go to the BRTF? That's the opposite of a true stakeholder process, but the tail has been wagging the dog ever since the first botched attempt at an improved system of MPAs under the Marine Life Protection Act.

>From day one a core group of pro-reserve scientists, working hand in
>hand
with the environmentalists who crafted the MLPA legislation, have dominated the process.

Phil Isenberg, chair of the BRTF, made it clear from the beginning that his policy panel was there to ease the work of those scientists, not to challenge them to come up with workable MPA models.

How so? Throughout the process to this point, SAT members have been allowed to work in a vacuum that focuses purely on ideal ecosystem protections, not real world solutions.

SAT MPA design guidelines in the Draft Master Plan Framework have been given the weight of law by the BRTF, even though the Fish and Game Commission said the guidelines were not to be prescriptive when commissioners approved the framework.

An example of this arose at the final working group meeting when SAT representative Rick Starr admitted no socioeconomic science had been factored into the guidance materials provided to members.

In an observation regarding all the packages, the SAT said, "Some of the MPA designs were clearly attempts at compromise between different user groups. Although compromise between users is good, we must caution that sometimes compromise comes at the expense of failing to achieve conservation goals."

Along those lines, the SAT further stated State Marine Conservation Areas (SCMA) that allowed recreational fishing had the lowest conservation value.

But don't SCMAs offer other value, such as a benefit to the anglers who are expected to foot the bill for the entire array of MPAs?

How is it possible for a true stakeholder decision to be made without a spirit of compromise, much less any sound socioeconomic science?

And how can a Science Advisory Team in its ivory tower possibly make the right decisions or offer advice when valuable information gained in the real world by stakeholders is not factored in?

Other areas of the country have successfully designed MPAs in groups that integrated scientists and stakeholders.

In California, the stakeholders are just a pawn in one of the biggest resource grabs in history.